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Dr. Archana Baudh
Assistant Professor History
Chandulal Chandrakar
Government Arts and
Commerce College Dhamdha,
Durg, Chhattisgarh, India

Narsingh Nath Bauddha
Assistant Professor CSE
SSIPMT, Raipur,
Chhattisgarh, India

Analysis of the historical and archaeological heritage of Dhamdha

Archana Baudh and Narsingh Nath Bauddha

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Abstract

Dhamdha, an ancient site in Chhattisgarh, is historically and archaeologically significant. The remains of ancient temples, statues, and architecture here reflect the glorious cultural history of the state. This region has long been a major center of political, cultural, and economic activities. There also appears to be a connection with the historical traditions of sites such as Sirpur and Malhar, as remains of Mauryan, Gupta, and post-Gupta architecture are visible here. Dhamdha is also known as the “city of ponds,” since even today much of its economic activity revolves around ponds. The objective of this research is to analyze the historical background, archaeological remains, and cultural heritage of Dhamdha.

Keywords: Dhamdha, Chhattisgarh, History, Culture, Archaeology, Architecture

Introduction

Dhamdha is located in Durg district of Chhattisgarh, on the banks of the Shivrath River, north of Durg city, along the Durg-Bemetara road ^[1]. The region lies between 21.33°-21.50° North latitude and 81.16°-81.56° East longitude ^[2]. It forms part of the plains of Chhattisgarh, a region lacking mountains, hills, and forests. The soil here is extremely fertile; certain portions contain black cotton soil, while the proximity to the river provides rich alluvial soil. Hence, horticultural crops such as cotton, sugarcane, fruits, and vegetables are produced here in abundance ^[3].

The antiquity of Dhamdha is difficult to determine, but the name Dhamdha resembles the Dhamma of Emperor Ashoka. It is possible that its original name was Dhamma, which later changed to Dhamdha, and owing to the presence of a fort, it came to be known as Dhamdhagarh ^[4]. During the Bhodan Movement, Vinoba Bhave visited Chhattisgarh on 20-21 January 1964. While visiting Dhamdha at that time, he began referring to the place as Dharmadham ^[5]. There is a nearby village named Rahtadha, suggesting that the term Dhammadah might have also been used for the area. The word “Daha” means burning or funeral rites, which suggests that this region may have been set on fire by invaders or tyrants. Historical accounts note that before 1145 AD, the site lay in ruins, with scattered remains of an ancient gateway, a fort, and several artistic stone artifacts ^[6].

Ancient History of Dhamdha

During the reign of the Maurya dynasty, South Kosal was part of the Maurya Empire, as nearly all territories of India—except the Chola, Chera, and Pandya kingdoms of the South—were under Mauryan authority ^[7]. Emperor Ashoka is said to have built 84,000 stupas and Buddhist viharas ^[8], and Dhamdha may well have been one such site. In fact, in the manuscript of the late Bangoli Prasad Tamrakar (1920-2009), a local resident of Dhamdha, it is stated that two Buddhist viharas still existed here ^[9]. At the entrance of the ancient Mahamaya Temple in Dhamdha, the image of Buddha in Bhumisparsha Mudra (earth-touching gesture) is engraved. “Mahamaya” was the name of Buddha’s mother, suggesting that the temple may have been dedicated in her honor. This emphasizes the antiquity of Dhamdha, revealing that both archaeological and literary sources point to its existence during the Mauryan period. Since South Kosal had strong associations with Buddha ^[10], inscriptions in Pali language and Brahmi script have been discovered at several locations in Durg district, alongside remains of Buddhism ^[11].

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Archana Baudh
Assistant Professor History
Chandulal Chandrakar
Government Arts and
Commerce College Dhamdha,
Durg, Chhattisgarh, India

Additionally, Queen Vasata Devi of Sirpur was the sister of the Buddhist king Bhaskarvarman. During the reign of her son, Mahashivagupta Balarjun, the Chinese traveller Xuanzang visited Sirpur and mentioned that the ruler was a follower of Buddhism^[10]. This provides evidence that rulers of the Durg region were themselves Buddhists, confirming that this area was deeply rooted in the Dhammic tradition. At a distance of about 4.5 kilometers from Dhamdha, on the banks of the Shivrath River, lies Titurghat. The remains at this site resemble those of a Buddhist vihara, as remains of stone pillars and inscriptions are scattered across the location. According to the Archaeological Department, the site is believed to have been built by King Apshal^[12]. The carved pillars display fine iconography, including statues and symbolic representations. For instance, one pillar depicts a royal-looking couple seated in a worshipful pose, with folded hands, beneath which lies the engraving of a spade- or sword-like object^[13]. This suggests that communities such as cobblers or artisans may have once held influence here, and that the kings and queens themselves were devotees of the Dhamma. Some archaeologists and local traditions identify this depiction as a Sati Stambh (pillar of a sati). Other carvings include depictions of a royal couple under the symbols of the sun and moon—indicating possible sun and moon worship—a blooming lotus flower, symbolizing purity and central to Buddhist philosophy, a cow nursing a calf, representing the compassion of the people, and three women seated in a worshipful posture. At present, 88 stone blocks remain at the site, of which 18 are regarded as Sati pillars and 49 as architectural fragments^[14]. A fragmented statue of the Buddha has also been found here. Taken together, these remains clearly suggest that the site was once a Buddhist vihara, likely established by local Buddhist rulers. According to the villagers, this site once resembled the architecture of Sirpur. Over time, it was renovated, and later a statue of a four-armed king was installed^[15]. Being located on the banks of the Shivrath River, this place also

functioned as a river ghat, which suggests that it might once have served as a river port. From here, the import and export of goods for trade likely took place. This points to both the grandeur of Dhamdha and the importance of its rich cultural and archaeological history.

The Kukurchabba Temple lies a short distance west of the town and is reached by crossing the footpath through Tar pond. *Kukur* means dog, and the temple is traditionally associated with curing dog bites. Conversations with villagers and observations at the site reveal that soil from a particular crossroads is given to patients bitten by dogs as a form of treatment. At this junction stands an ancient pomegranate tree, believed to be centuries old. The place is enclosed by outer walls, and within it lies another smaller wall^[16]. Inside this inner enclosure, a statue inscribed with the name *Kaal Bhairav* was installed in 2008. Remnants of old brickwork are visible on the walls, and a local resident remains on site as a caretaker. According to him, the area was originally a mound with no images or idols. Later, a statue of a dog was placed upon it. It is further believed that in earlier times sages and saints lived here, consecrated the site, and moved on, leaving behind a sanctified soil that people then began to regard as medicine^[17]. Perhaps the soil attached to the root of the pomegranate tree had some perceived remedy, as folklore claims “one pomegranate cures a hundred diseases.” However, from a scientific perspective, this is merely superstition.

Mahamaya Temple

The main temples of Dhamdha are the Mahamaya Temple and the Budhadev Temple. Their stone-built entrance, known as Singhdwar, reflects the grandeur and glorious past of Dhamdha. Compared to other forts of Chhattisgarh, this gateway is considered exceptional. Intricate According to legend, the gate also depicts the ten avatars of Vishnu: Matsya, Varaha, Narasimha, and Vamana on the right side, and Parashuram, Ram-Balram, Buddha, and Kalki on the left^[18].

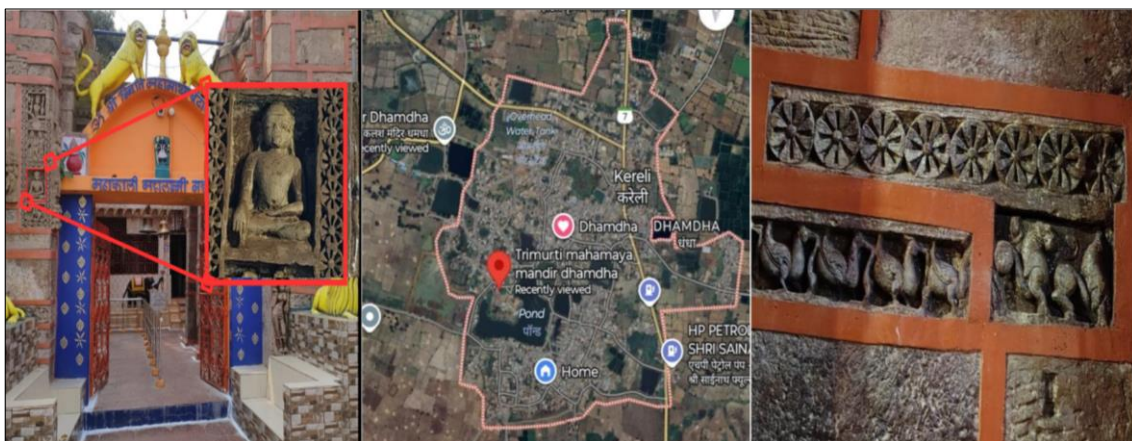


Fig 1: Statue of Goddess Mahamaya in the northern sanctum of the Trimurti Mahamaya Temple

In the temple's northern sanctum stands the statue of Mahamaya Devi, while the eastern side enshrines Budhadev. Budhadev is considered a localized form of Buddha, and Mahamaya was the name of Buddha's mother. This indicates that devotees of both Buddha and Mahamaya were numerous in this region, and even the rulers were followers of the Dhamma, since the temple is directly connected to the fort by a hidden passage. On the outer walls of the temple, the *Ashtashilachakra* is engraved,

symbolizing the *Ashtangik Marg* (Eightfold Path). Behind the Budhadev Temple lies Budha Talab, and many sites in the area are named after Buddha, illustrating both the antiquity of Dhamdha and the large number of his followers^[19]. This continuity also demonstrates cultural change over time. The Trimurti Mahamaya Temple is popularly believed to be a symbol of Adishakti. Within its sanctum, the three goddesses—Mahalakshmi, Mahakali, and Mahasaraswati—are enshrined together. Such physical depictions of all three

goddesses in one shrine are extremely rare in India. At Vaishnodevi in Jammu and Kashmir, they appear in symbolic *pind* form, but here they are worshipped in full physical form. The temple was constructed by King Dashwant Singh in 1589 ^[20]. According to the temple inscription, Queen Buddhmati often dreamt of divine idols. Inspired by these dreams, excavations were carried out at the fort gate, A statue was found here, which was called the statue of Mahakali. Another statue was brought from the bank of Shivrath river five miles away, which was named Mahalakshmi and a statue was found from the hollow of a tamarind tree, which was named Saraswati. After installing the three idols, Queen Buddhmati and her son Dashwant built the temple in 1340 AD. The worship and management of the temple were entrusted to Achala Pandey ^[21].

On the banks of Chaukhadia pond, remains of many ancient pillars are visible. There are two temples one of which is named Shiva temple and the other is named Chaturbhuj Vishnu temple, the statue of Nandi is installed in the temple. This site is now protected by the Archaeological Department ^[22]. Within the pond area stands a unique pillar, upon which four intertwined snake hoods are carved. Atop the hoods, a bead- or pot-like shape is engraved. This pillar also once held a copper plate, which was uprooted by invaders. Similarly, in Daani pond another pillar contained copper plates that provide information relating to pond construction and renovation. On the banks of Budha Talab and Tar pond stands the Bridheshwar Shiva Temple, where a Shivalinga and a snake idol are enshrined ^[23]. The presence of snake motifs indicates possible connections to the rule of the Phaninagvanshi kings of Kawardha ^[24]. A Radha Krishna Temple was built here in 1820 during Maratha rule, when the region was under the Bhosale rulers. Likewise, the Chargodiya Temple was established in Naiyapara in 1744 by Govinddas Bairagi, who also excavated a pond covering

one acre. The temple was later damaged in 2014, but residents of the town restored the dilapidated structure. Dhamdha is also associated with the fifth Guru of the Kabir Panth, Kevalnaam Saheb, who stayed here between 1744 and 1768 AD. His *Samadhi Sthal* is still present and is now known as Kevaldham Ashram, located near Gandai Chowk on the Dhamdha-Gandai road. A *Jaistambh* (pillar of victory) stands here, adorned with a white flag. Every year, during *Maghi Punni*, a large fair is organized at this site ^[25].

Establishment of the Gond State

Dhamdha Fort is considered to be very ancient, and this area was once a part of the Gondwana Empire during the medieval period. The Gond kings ruled here for about seven hundred years. During this time, Ratanpur maintained close relations with Dhamdha. The fame of Dhamdha is evident from the fact that Raipur was once known as *Dhamdha Raipur* ^[26]. During the reign of the Kalchuris, around 1045 AD, Gond brothers Saand and Vijayi were granted the Zamindari of Saradha as a reward. According to the inscription of the Mahamaya Temple, Sarada and Dhamdha lay on the border of the Ratanpur state, which was counted as rugged forestland.²¹ In this area, two brothers named Saand and Vijayi, residents of Sarada and Nevri, created havoc by looting and spreading terror. Unable to tolerate their activities, the king of Ratanpur imprisoned them. Around the same time, the king of Ratanpur desired a white elephant from the king of Saranggarh. He released Saand and Vijayi on the condition that they would deliver the elephant to him. Both brothers successfully accomplished this task and presented the elephant as dowry during the marriage of the princess of Ratanpur. As a result, the area of Saradha was handed over to Saand, who belonged to the Gond caste ^[27].



Fig 2: Legendary depiction associated with the founding history of the Trimurti Mahamaya Temple

According to legend, the two brothers tamed a mad elephant, for which they were rewarded with the Saradha region, which included present-day Bemetara Berla. Seeing ancient forts and architectural ruins in Dhamdha, they considered the area suitable and made it their capital. Manuscript evidence suggests that around 1300 AD, the brave Gond chief Saand established the city of Dhamdha and built its fort. His descendants continued to rule for 13 generations. Many of these rulers were known to be benevolent and glorious. They built numerous ponds and temples. Dashwant Singh was the tenth king of this dynasty. Since he was a minor at the time of his coronation, his mother, Queen Buddhmati, administered the kingdom in his stead ^[28]. The Gond dynasty ruled here until 1832 AD. During their reign, the region was prosperous, and its people were content. Under the rule of kings Sonsay and Revasay, taxes were neither levied nor punishments imposed. A well-known saying from that period is remembered in

folklore: “*Na dande jaye, na bode jaye*” (neither punishment was given, nor penalty imposed). It is also believed in folk tradition that the king of Dhamdha used to collect unused iron from farmers’ ploughs as tax, which he then allegedly transformed into gold through the mystical *Parash* stone. In 1935, the Dhamdha Fort complex was declared a protected monument by the Archaeological Survey of India. However, in 1962 it was removed from the protected list. Later, in 2003, the Government of Chhattisgarh handed it over to the Central Gond Mahasabha ^[29]. Around 1857, the Gond kings of Dhamdha revolted, though the uprising was quelled before it could spread further. The Gonds participated actively in the freedom struggle. In 1856, just before the First War of Independence, King Bhawani Singh Thakur of Dhamdha waged a fierce battle against the Marathas and the British for three months. Ultimately, he was betrayed by his own Diwan, who conspired with the British and the Bhosales. With the

Diwan's help, the main gates were opened, and King Bhawani Singh was captured, tied to a cannon, and executed when the British blew him apart. Thus, due to the treachery of the Diwan, the king attained martyrdom while fighting bravely in the war^[30].

Six Agar Six Kori Talabs

The economic prosperity of ancient Dhamdha is evident from the 126 ponds that still exist here. The region was popularly called the *city of six agar six kori talabs* (a poetic description of its numerous ponds). Since the royal palace was located here, the palace complex was fortified with protective walls and a surrounding water system. For security purposes, a circular enclosure was created. Excavations have revealed a series of water enclosures, the first being Budha Talab, spread over 4.89 hectares, which was constructed for the protection of the royal palace and the Mahamaya shrine. Subsequently, several other ponds were built at different levels, including Naiya Talab, Dani Talab, Bairagi Talab, Asaiya, Manu Dabri, School Dabri, Bawa Dabri, Beduvan Reservoir, Tar Talab, Hathi Budan, Piprahi, Banfara, Raja Talab, Bandhwa Talab, and Bhanpur Dabri, among others^[31]. Over time, some of these ponds were filled in and converted into settlements or roads. Much like the advanced urban water conservation system of Dholavira, a site of the Indus Valley Civilization, the ponds at Dhamdha were interconnected through a network of drains. This ensured that when one pond overflowed, water would flow into the next, efficiently managing water storage^[32]. The Budhanala, a natural canal, also contributed to filling these ponds, making them a remarkable example of traditional water conservation.

The involvement of the Od caste in pond excavation highlights their importance to the economic history of Dhamdha. The Od caste, known as expert diggers and miners who worked across various provinces of India, were considered a nomadic community. Linked to them is a local oral epic called the *Dashmat Kaina Saga*, which praises a woman named Dashmat from Chhattisgarh. The saga narrates her resistance to the feudal oppression of King Mahamdev of Durg. Within this tale are references to water dams like Harna Bandha of Durg district and other reservoirs of Rajnandgaon district. From this, it appears likely that the ponds of Dhamdha were constructed by the Od caste as part of their hereditary occupation. The saga is believed to date back to the 12th and 13th centuries^[33].

Conclusion

Dhamdha possesses a rich historical, cultural, and economic heritage. Its temples, ponds, legends, and monuments form an important link in understanding the cultural continuity and historical development of Chhattisgarh. Archaeological evidence sheds light on its transformations over time, making Dhamdha a vital site for the reconstruction of regional history.

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